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ABSTRACT

Using a single theme for a course in basic writing can be an effective and enjoyable way of teaching and learning. One college that developed such a program saw as the criteria for the course: learning grammar, writing at least eight in-class paragraphs of 300 words each in the quarter, attending the college's writing center and working with a tutor regularly, and passing departmental and university proficiency exams. Other major goals were for students to enjoy writing and to introduce content ideas. The thematic approach was an attempt to generate student interest in writing while focusing the course on basic writing problems. One section, employing a "detective story" theme, used two books: the writing text normally used in developmental writing courses and a paperback anthology of mini-mysteries. The pattern for each week's class work generally consisted of reading a chapter in the writing text and doing the exercises, discussing and reviewing the current grammatical concept, and outlining the next writing assignment. Assignments were related to the theme. It is possible to use such a thematic approach and to work on skills such as analytical writing, using conditional tenses, and practicing dictionary usage. Effective themes need to be applicable to student experience, touch a deep vein of interest, and be broad enough to allow complex strategies. (TJ)

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Crime on Our Minds: A Thematic Approach to Basic Writing

Cecilia Macheski

To relieve the tedium of uninterrupted grammar lessons and to overcome what we felt were the limitations of auto-biographical narratives, the English Department at LaGuardia Community College of CUNY has been experimenting with a new form of thematic approach to the teaching of basic writing skills. We developed five special sections of our remedial level course, Fundamentals of Effective Writing. Each section focused on a selected theme: sports, science fiction, the experiences of Black women, mythology, and the detective story. The unique success of the detective section which I designed and taught suggests that we have found a new way not only to make the learning of writing more enjoyable, but also far more effective.

Developing a thematic approach to basic writing led us to anticipate a few problems. Before discussing these, however, I will outline the criteria for LaGuardia's regular English 100 course in order to put the special detective section in context. Fundamentals of Writing is primarily a grammar course. Students are placed on the basis of a writing sample. Traditionally, the student is asked to write at least eight in-class paragraphs of 300 words in the ten week quarter. The student must attend the college's Writing Center and work with a tutor regularly, and pass a departmental Exit Examination and a university-wide writing proficiency essay. Our exam requires that the student write a 300 word paragraph in class; it must contain fewer than eight major grammatical errors, not more than two of which can be sentence structure errors.

One of our major goals in English 100--despite the rigidity implied by these standards--is not only to teach students to write correctly, but to enjoy writing as well. Thus the course has become a grab bag of stimuli: films, newspaper articles, records, brief readings from prose masters, and anything else that might

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generate that mandatory weekly writing topic were snatched at by weary and often desperate instructors. The results, though usually adequate, were uneven. Often, instructors found that one or two topics were enormously popular with students and resulted in lovely paragraphs filled with rich details, but others simply flopped.

Also, we searched for a way to introduce content ideas for student papers into the Fundamentals course in such a way that it would not take away from any of the time we so urgently needed for skills work, and yet would give the course a more cohesive structure. We had, after all, little enough time to cover all the necessary grammatical and rhetorical material we knew was critical, since most students were expected to achieve literacy after a single quarter. On the other hand, concentrating the course exclusively on grammar to the point where ideas had no room left students with nothing to write about.

Many instructors were successful with autobiographical and experiencial writing topics. Seeming to find these satisfactory up to a point, students obligingly poured out narratives about their happiest experiences, their worst experiences, their aging parents, their ideal cars, their career goals, their love-lives, their nightmares and their daydreams. The emphasis on autobiographical writing served many valuable purposes: topics required no research, no reading, no remarkable creative talents. If the writing could emerge from sources deep within the writer, it might generate real confidence and lead the student to appreciate his or her value as a writer, and the value of the skills being learned. Since narrative structures require, on this level, only a simple chronological structure, and few logistical acrobatics, the writer's mind is left free to perform the demanding job of choosing precise words, constructing clear sentences, and building coherent paragraphs.

But the major weaknesses of a course based almost exclusively on autobiographical writing became evident, more often than not,

after the students advanced into Basic Composition: first person narratives gave the students no training in analysis, or in dealing with abstractions. That critical barrier from personal to impersonal prose remained insurmountable. The grammar skills they fought so hard to retain had to be tossed aside so that all concentration could be centered on the new and difficult demands of expository prose. Secondly, too many students, not to mention teachers, found the confessional form uncomfortable. Many were justifiably reluctant to have their privacy invaded, despite all the trust and warmth of the best classroom atmosphere.

In an attempt, therefore, to generate student interest in writing while at the same time focusing the course on basic writing problems such as sentence structure and subject-verb agreement, we designed these thematic sections. Each of the writing assignments related in some way to the broadly interpreted theme of "the detective story." We felt that critical urban issues such as crime and society, violence in America, the role of the police, and much more could be subtly introduced under this rubric. (I realize that these concepts, stated so abstractly, sound far too difficult, if not outrageous, for a basic writing class; the application of the abstractions in specific limited writing topics which I will discuss later on will, I hope, alter that impression). The role of the detective and the issue of crime in our society is one which students, we felt sure, could respond to enthusiastically.

Our major concern in bringing such volatile content into a skills course was that students' skills abilities would not be adequate for expressing the strong feelings we hoped to arouse. Similarly, we were greatly concerned that the instructor would be all too easily tempted to allow the course to become a discussion course, and lose the fundamental focus on basic skills. Thus the syllabus was planned with great attention around one main objective: to bring in material on the detective theme in such a way that it touched on some autobiographical or psychological nerve of the students, and to bring in only short, concrete readings

that could be used to illustrate and reinforce grammatical or rhetorical strategies.

At this point, I would like to outline some of the major parts of the syllabus to illustrate how these ends were achieved. Two books were assigned: one, the writing text normally used in the developmental writing courses at the college, and the other a paperback anthology of "minute" or "mini" mysteries. These are stories that are extremely brief, usually a single page.

The course began with the usual diagnostic procedure. Students were asked to write a paragraph called "The Perfect Crime." If they were guaranteed immunity, what major crime would they commit? They were asked to supply "what," "how," and "why" details. It was the results of this writing sample that convinced me that we had tapped a sensitive and rich vein, for the writing flowed out with remarkable speed into essays of unusual length, filled with vivid, precise details. Most papers, interestingly, contained a prefatory remark to the effect, "I've been thinking about this for a long time..." or, "It's funny you should ask me to write on this, because just the other day I was thinking I'd like to kill so-and-so..."

These students were not any better as writers than other English 100 students; there were all the usual flaws. Yet they had overcome the first significant obstacle: they were writing. The topic motivated many students to exceed by far the 250 word limit I had set on their paragraphs. And, best of all, the papers were enormous fun to read.

After the initial success, the course proceeded along a more or less regular pattern. We met three times a week. For the first class in any week, students would read a chapter in the writing text and do the exercises. In class, we would discuss, review and reinforce the current grammatical concept. The class might, for instance, be focused on subject and verb identification. For homework that night, students would be assigned two mini-mysteries to read. They would have to circle all the subjects, and underline the main verbs in the two short readings. In class on the second day

we would first go over the form of the story, examining any difficult sentences, or complex vocabulary words. We might do some more drill to identify verbs. That class would then be spent doing two other things; first, introducing the concept of tenses, especially the simple past. We would list past tense indicators and study a few irregular verbs. The remaining part of the class would be spent outlining the next writing assignment. In this case, it was a narration. Students had to tell a story of a recent crime they had read about in a newspaper, or heard about on television. The paragraph had to have a chronological structure, and had to be entirely in the past tense. We would work on topic sentences particularly. I made sure that by the time each student left, he or she had three possible topic sentences. During the next class that week, students wrote their narratives. They had to use one of the sentences from the previous lesson. After they finished writing, I asked them to circle every verb in the paragraph and check the verb ending for the tense indicator. This proved a good technique for teaching general proofreading, since students often spotted other errors while hunting for verbs.

My strategy, then, was to link a specific grammar skill to an appropriate rhetorical structure, to reinforce the skill in context. Further reinforcement came from the reading assignments, which worked as grammar drills, too. This strategy was carried out in a number of other assignments, which I will outline briefly:

1. an essay called "The Scene of the Crime" asked students to imagine that their homes had just been robbed. They must describe the scene, and include at least ten adjectives and two complex sentences.
2. A later topic attempted to move students away from personal experience and toward more analytical writing. The topic was: "Would you make a better criminal, or are you more likely to be a victim of a crime?" Here we concentrated on the use of conditional tenses, avoidance of fragments caused by "if," "since," "after," and so forth, and paragraph unity.
3. Yet another short assignment asked students to bring to class a

newspaper article that used one of the following words: manslaughter, victimless crime, or violence. From these we derived paragraphs of definition by example. The skill here was dictionary practice.

You will by now, I hope, be seeing the other possibilities. The students were able, by themselves, to develop such topics as, "Was Sherlock Holmes a better detective than Kojak? Why or why not?" To answer the question, the student went, on her own, to the library and began to read some Conan Doyle stories. Another student decided to interview his neighbors and a local police officer to find out why the crime rate in his neighborhood had gone down in the last year.

The most surprising aspect of all the resulting essays was their honesty. The theme of "the detective story" seemed to work as a shield, protecting the writier from fears about confessional writing, yet, more subtly, allowing and encouraging him or her to respond to deeply meaningful questions about self and environment.

The detective theme seemed to have worked well for several reasons. Students learned necessary grammar skills; these skills were immediately reinforced when the students used a particular strategy chosen to emphasize the new skill. Students read short stories where they saw the skills in action in someone else's writing. Most important--and probably the major reason for the success of the course-- all the writing assignments were related, without being too similar. As a result, students were thinking and developing ideas throughout the course, building and accumulating insights, instead of having to start from scratch for each paper topic.

The thematic approach to basic writing, then, and most of the other thematic sections we ran, proved even more successful than we had hoped. For instance, in my class of seventeen students, only three did not pass. The average failure rate for English 100 is fifty per cent. The passing rates in most of the other thematic sections were similarly impressive. Students were able to learn all the necessary grammatical skills in a context that gave them a real purpose. Paragraphs grew and expanded as students sought models or guides for expressing the feelings the topics stimulated.

For anyone planning to experiment with the thematic approach to helping students learn to write, let me offer some suggestions. First, the detective theme is only one of many that can be used.

I have offered it here only as an example of the technique in action. Other themes have proven equally valuable. These are sports, the roles and problems of women, mythology, and science fiction. Of these, science fiction proved the most difficult. Students found the ideas too abstract from the beginning, and were unable to make connections between the stories they read and their own experiences. The others were quite popular courses. A few requirements seem to be needed in searching for a theme. It must be applicable, at least initially, to the student's experiences. Thus crime, sports, women's issues and so forth work well. The topics must be broad enough to allow the writers to move from narrative to more complex strategies such as analysis. The topic should touch a deep vein of interest--perhaps a vein unrecognized by the student. The psychological aspects of crime do this effectively. Mythology is also very provocative, as are specific religious questions. Topics that presuppose a broad historical background do not work well, since too many of our students, at least, seem to lack a knowledge of or interest in history.

In conclusion, I can only hope that our experiments, both successful and not, will encourage others to continue the process of finding new ways to teach and learn about writing. Like good detectives, writing teachers must pursue every clue in order to arrive at a solution.

To those of us who have long been detective novel junkies, the lure and challenge of the detective process is perhaps not so unexpected. To many of our students though, most of whom have never heard of Lord Peter Wimsey or Hercule Poirot, this experiment can offer a new and often surprising answer to the critical question of "whodunit." They have. They have solved the mystery: they have learned to write. No longer the victims of their own weak skills, they are now experienced detectives looking for more themes to conquer.

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